

Interview With Sam Donaldson of ABC News for “Prime Time Live” in
Dakar, Senegal
April 1, 1998

Jonesboro Incident

Mr. Donaldson. Mr. President, thanks very much for coming. Why do you think it happened the other day in Jonesboro? I mean, the police have taken into custody two young boys, 13 and 11, and that’s just stunning.

The President. I don’t know why it happened. And I think we’re going to have to wait until we hear something from those young men or their spokespeople, their lawyers or their parents or somebody, to know more than we now know.

But it is troubling that this has happened, this school-related violence, now three times in three States, resulting in the deaths of children, in the last few months. For me, this was especially hard because I spent a lot of time in my life in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the people there have been very good to me, and we’ve done a lot of things together.

I could barely look at that service in the convocation center, because that convocation center was built as a place of joy and celebration. When I was Governor, it was one of the biggest issues in my campaign in 1982 that I would build that convocation center. And to see it housing all those people in all their grief, it was very sad.

But I think we have to work on two things. I think we have to first of all support the people there, moving from their heartbreak to healing and to getting their hope back. And then I think the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education have got to get all the available information on these three incidents and any others like it, and then see if there is a pattern and whether, from that pattern, we can draw some conclusions about what we should do.

Mr. Donaldson. When I was a little kid I can remember I’d get angry, and maybe you did too, in the schoolyard or something, but it never occurred to me to plan something like that.

The President. No. That’s why I think we can’t know. I mean, there is all kinds of speculation. I think it’s just too early to assign blame, but I think everyone should examine the issues. I think every parent should redouble his or her efforts to teach their children right from wrong

and to warn them about the dangers of guns, I think not only in the South but throughout the country where there are a lot of guns because people like to hunt and enjoy it and regularly teach their children at a fairly early age. I think I was 12 the first time I fired a .22.

Mr. Donaldson. And you’re a hunter?

The President. Yes. I don’t do it much anymore, but I think I was about 12 years old. But you know, there has to be some extra care taken, where children are hunting, to make sure they understand gun safety and also the profound dangers of it.

And finally I think all this effort that’s been made in the last few years to get the television ratings on violence and have movies evaluated for violence, I think we maybe even need to go underneath that and examine whether, in scenes of violence in movies and television, we have to be very careful not to either glorify it or minimize it, make it look almost cartoon-like.

I’ll never forget what the principal at Jonesboro told me when we talked after I called her. She said, “You know, when I went out there and I saw those children lying on the ground and I saw one of them horribly disfigured and all those people gushing blood, it was very different from what I see in the movies,” she said.

Mr. Donaldson. Well, we have movies that are violent and—“L.A. Confidential” has won a lot of awards; remember a few years ago, “Fargo”—and television programs on the networks are violent. Do you think there would be something to just saying to Hollywood and to everybody involved, “Guys, cut it out, or at least cut it down?”

The President. Well, what I think about the violence is—and again, I’m not an expert, which is one reason I’d like to see them review all the literature—I think the sheer volume of things to which children at an early age are exposed tends to numb their feelings about it. We do have studies on that. So maybe cutting it down is one good thing.

The other thing, I think, is if—a lot of these stories require the presentation of some violence, and it is a part of life. It's a part of a lot of the stories. If a story line requires the presentation of violence, then I think it ought not to either be glorified or cartoonized, if you will. People need to understand it's a serious thing with horrible consequences, because one of the problems with children, of course, and one of the reasons we assign different levels of responsibility to people as they get older, for their actions, is they can't often fully understand the consequences of their actions. So you have to bend over backwards to make sure—we adults do—that we've done everything we can to make sure they do understand the consequences of certain actions as we present those consequences to them.

Mr. Donaldson. On that point, it's said that one of these little boys is just now devastated, frightened, said to be frightened, calling for his mother. It's as if suddenly his eyes came open, and he was horrified with what he saw.

The President. Well, as I said, we don't know enough about that. That may well be true. But these children that have been arrested, there will have to be psychological profiles done on them. We'll have to have a lot more facts before we can draw any conclusions. I've tried to be real careful about that. I think all Americans should.

But we know generally we need to make sure there are no guns in schools. We need to enforce the youth handgun act we passed in 1994. And we need to do everything we can to teach the kids right from wrong. And in the places where hunting is a part of the culture and where there are guns around the house, those of us who have been a part of that culture, and those who are, have a special responsibility to make sure that the guns are kept out of reach of people who shouldn't have them. And we need to get these child safety locks on all these handguns and other guns that we can. And we need to support constant drilling about safe use and what the consequences are, because this is a tragedy that will take a long time to get over.

Mr. Donaldson. You know, in Arkansas as well as several other States, these two young boys, if in fact they happened to have been, as the police believe, involved in this and are charged, cannot be tried as adults, which would mean that they will get out, if they're incarcerated, at age 18 or 21 at the latest. And already some

of the relatives are saying that wouldn't be justice. What do you say?

The President. Well, that's something of course we'll have to review. But most States have lowered the age at which people at least can be tried as adults. In our State, in Arkansas, the way it works is a determination can be made—the prosecutor can ask and then a court can decide that a young person under the age of 18, but 14 or over, could be tried as adults if the circumstances warranted.

It looks to me like one of the things this case will do is probably launch a debate in America about whether there should be some intermediate step. That is: Okay, maybe people below a certain age shouldn't be tried as adults, but should there be some means of keeping them incarcerated after their 18th or their 20th birthday if the circumstances warrant that, either the severity of the crime or concern about their mental condition and stability, should they be released.

Again, I'll make no judgment on the facts of this case, but I think that there will be a serious debate about that.

But the real thing is, I'll say again, is to try to prevent things like this from happening in the first place. You just have to—we have to work very, very hard at hammering home to our children what the consequences of using guns are. We have to keep the guns out of the hands of the kids that shouldn't—when they shouldn't have them. We need to make sure that the gun safety practices are very strong. They need to be kept out of the hands of kids. The child safety locks ought to be on them wherever possible.

And then, again, I'm hopeful that the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education, when they get all the facts of the these three cases and, as I said, any others if there are others out there, that they will show a pattern—practice maybe that will tell us something else we can do, if not legislation, then practice, that will reduce the chances that this will happen.

Mr. Donaldson. What is your hunch? Do you think we're in for an epidemic? I mean, there are copycat crimes, as you know. Until these three incidents that you referred to, I don't recall another one.

The President. Well, I don't know. I hope they're—I hope not. I think, actually, that the kind of publicity that this incident is getting, and the fact that it's now kind of—America is

now aware that this is the third of three such incidents, may break whatever spell there might be out there for copycats.

I know we were concerned several years ago, when I was Governor of Arkansas, when we had some children commit suicide in a small community like Jonesboro, deeply religious, hard-working community. And there seemed to be a little rash around America at the time of children killing themselves. So everybody got together and worked on it, tried to highlight it.

I would be surprised if there is a rash of this, but I would also be surprised if there is not a real effort now on the part of individuals and communities and schools to take actions that will reduce the chance that it will happen again. I also think that in the community at large and in our schoolrooms, in our churches, in our homes now, everybody is going to be a little more sensitive for children that seem to be withdrawing, seem to be troubled, that seem to be confused.

Again I say, the only really satisfactory response to all this is to try to do those things which will prevent these things from happening in the first place. Once they happen, you do the best you can to do justice in the particular case, but that's not nearly as good as trying to do those things which will keep them from happening again.

Mr. Donaldson. You're on a very important trip, as you see it, to Africa, and a lot of other people agree with you, but did you consider at all perhaps going back for the service?

The President. I thought about it. But when I realized that they—when I understood that they were willing to—wanted me to present a videotape, I thought it was the responsible thing to do, because I thought I could do more good for the country by finishing this trip, and I think that was the right decision.

I wanted to be there, not only because it was in my home State and it was a heart-breaking, mammoth, awful thing, but I have spent an inordinate amount of time in that part of Arkansas. The mayor in the town has been my friend a long time, the county judge, and all these people that I've known forever. I just—it was an awful thing for me personally, and I just grieve for those people.

Mr. Donaldson. What can you say to them? What do you say to parents who have lost a child this way, or to the relatives of the teacher

who was killed? Is there anything that can be said?

The President. I don't have anything to say other than what I said in my message to them right now. I think that their friends need to hold them close, and they need to just—it takes a long time to heal. And one of the things that I have learned even more since I've been President is that a lot of things happen in this life that cannot be explained or justified, and lot of living is overcoming the unjustifiable, the madness, and somehow going on.

I would say that I believe the children who perished and the teacher who perished, from all reports, had lived extremely good lives and were extremely good people, and they would want their parents, their siblings, the spouses—the young teacher's husband—they would want them to go on living, to look for positive things to live for, to be grateful for the time they had with the children and the teacher.

And at some point you have to lay down the loss. You can never give it up. You can never stop hurting. You can never stop missing. But a choice has to be made to go on and to make the most of whatever is left in life. And I think that's what most people—most good people who die too young in an unfair way, if they could speak across space and time to their loved ones, would try to lift them up and ease their pain. They wouldn't want them to stay in the grip of hatred. They wouldn't want them to be paralyzed by grief. So I hope they'll be able to find peace and healing and go on.

President's Trip to Africa

Mr. Donaldson. Finally, Mr. President, are you happy to be going tomorrow?

The President. You bet. I'm really glad—I'm getting tired now. We've worked very hard on this trip. But it's been a good thing for our country, I think. It certainly has been an enlightening experience, I believe, for everyone on this trip. I've been immensely impressed by the energy, the intelligence, the passion of the people I've met in positions of power and in the small villages in the countryside.

And I think that we can make a strong partnership with people in Africa that we will need in the 21st century. Among other things, I think most Americans were surprised to learn that American investment in Africa earns a return of 30 percent a year, which is higher than investment on any other continent. We can do

well for ourselves by making a good partnership with Africa, and I hope as we go home there will be broad bipartisan support for continuing to deepen this partnership. And I hope it will be followed by a lot of private citizens, business people, and others coming over here and getting involved.

There is a lot to be done here and a great future here, and I want us to be a part of it.

Mr. Donaldson. Thank you, Mr. President. Thanks for sitting down with us.

The President. Thank you, Sam.

NOTE: The interview began at 8:45 p.m. at Le Meridien President Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, accused killers in the Jonesboro, AR, middle school murders; Karen Curtner, principal, Westside Middle School; Mayor Hubert A. Brodell of Jonesboro; and Roy (Red) Bearden, Craighead County judge. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Exchange With Reporters in Dakar April 2, 1998

Dismissal of Paula Jones Civil Lawsuit

The President. Good morning.

Q. Did you get some good news last night, Mr. President?

The President. Well, obviously I'm pleased by the decision, and I think the judge's opinion speaks for itself. Let me say, though, I'm also immensely pleased by this trip, and I'm very much looking forward to going home and continuing the work of the very ambitious agenda we've got there.

Q. Mr. President, the suit was thrown out, but it did not clear your name. Are you disappointed by that?

The President. Well, the nature of the motion would not permit that, but the most important thing is that I can go back now and continue the work that I'm doing. That's the most important thing to me. I want to get back to the business of the people.

Independent Counsel's Investigation

Q. Mr. Starr says it has no effect on his investigation. Is that your view, sir?

The President. I don't have any comment on Mr. Starr.

Q. Mr. President, how have these last 3 years affected the institution of the Presidency? Has this been a good thing for the Presidency?

The President. Well, let me say, I've done my best to do what every President who has commented on this, from George Washington forward, has said the President should do, which is that for the period of your service, insofar as possible, you should cease to be an individual citizen and spend all your time and energy on the country. And that's what I've tried to do. And I've done my best at it, and the results have been satisfactory, I think, for the American people. And that's what I intend to continue to do. Others should evaluate that question, but I need to keep working on the people's business, and that's what I intend to do.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:52 a.m. at the Le Meridien President Hotel. During the exchange, he referred to U.S. District Judge Susan Webber Wright and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.